

New database to help track criminals

By **Brie Handgraaf** – **The Rocky Mount Telegram**

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A new criminal-tracking database is meant to lessen the risk law enforcement officers face everyday.

The Criminal Justice Law Enforcement Automated Data Services, more commonly known as CJLEADS, is a Web-based program that integrates information from state databases used by criminal justice professionals to get comprehensive profiles of offenders.

This means officers and court personnel can do one search and see a complete profile of an offender. The search yields a wealth of information, including a driver's license photograph, driving record, vehicle registration information, pending court cases, outstanding warrants, convictions, prison incarceration records and gang affiliations. Known addresses and contact information, whether an offender is on the sex offender registry or has a concealed handgun permit also is shown in the search results.

"The whole objective was to allow officials to log onto CJLEADS and run a query, and it will bring back all this clustered information on an offender," said Kay Meyer, project manager for development of the database. "Our goal was to consolidate all this information into one place instead of having to do searches on multiple databases."

Meyer said building the system to accomplish that mission wasn't an easy task because each of the databases the offender's profile is built from uses different ways of storing information. For example, offenders have an N.C. Department of Correction number assigned to them when they are imprisoned and the records are filed under that number — not by the offender's name.

To further complicate matters, some offenders have multiple spellings of their names, so once staff designed algorithms to recognize an offender's records from different databases, the database still might create several profiles related to the same person.

After working through the difficulties, staff developed the database, which compiles 41 million files on 13 million offenders. Creators of the database have spent the last year implementing the technology across the state, including an event Wednesday to launch in Nash, Edgecombe and Wilson counties.

"CJLEADS centralizes all of this information from all of these different sources into one, easy-to-use format," Rocky Mount police Sgt. Thomas Seighman said.

**TRAGEDY TURNED CATALYST**

N.C. State Controller David McCoy, whose office was tasked with building the integrated database, told area law enforcement officials Wednesday that although the idea for the system had been in place since 1994, it wasn't until two murders in 2008 that the effort moved forward.

In January 2008, Duke University graduate student Abhijit Mahato was killed when suspects broke into his home.

"I heard about his murder and thought it was just a tragedy, but I turned off the light and went to sleep," McCoy said. "I hate to say it, but it has become white noise when we hear about these tragedies."

Two months later, University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill student-body president Eve Carson was killed by Demario Atwater and Laurence Lovette Jr. — who also was convicted of Mahato's murder. Both suspects were on probation at the time of the killings, and Atwater was in a Wake County courtroom just two days before Carson's murder facing a judge about a probation violation because he had been convicted of possession of a firearm by a felon in Granville County.

McCoy said Atwater had been sentenced to intensive supervision probation, but he "fell through the cracks."

"Eve Carson was murdered 200 yards from my house. She was a friend of my daughter, and her death was not white noise in the McCoy's household," he said. "We heard Eve's murder and the General Assembly did, too."

Legislators recognized the need for a state-of-the-art integrated criminal justice information system and allocated \$27 million to support developing and implementing it in three years. Meyer said they have spent \$17 million so far and anticipate coming in seven percent under budget at \$25.3 million.

"The General Assembly understands, as do I, that in order for this application to be used and continue to be used, we could not pass the cost on to

local folks," McCoy said.

All authorized users of the system, therefore, use it for free.

"Because there is no charge, it means it has been readily adopted by everybody," Meyer said.

She said using the database pays for itself in efficiency among users. For example, the Wake County clerk of court told project developers the average time required to research cases was 10 minutes, but by using the database, that research was done 33 percent faster.

Meyer said that if 30 percent of court personnel access an average of 12 offender or Department of Motor Vehicle records a week, the estimated savings is \$2.295 million annually. If 30 percent of law enforcement do an average of 21 searches a week, it will save \$13.875 million annually.

“That is not savings you can put back in the budget, but it does help to offset the cost of the application,” she said.

Seighman said he anticipates the departments’ 200 authorized users will save a tremendous amount of time once they are trained. Officers cannot currently access Department of Motor Vehicle records in patrol cars and have to call dispatchers to do a search. He said that even just having access to those records will save a considerable amount of time and manpower.

“That is just one advantage of having CJLEADS,” Seighman said. “It can do so much more for us. I am really looking forward to getting it rolled out to all our personnel.”

Edgecombe County Sheriff James Knight said he thinks database features like special icons that warn officers of offenders with violent criminal or drug histories and concealed handgun permits will not only save time, but will save lives.

“There are probably a thousand different case scenarios that if this system had been in place, an officer would have been more prepared for what he encountered,” Knight said. “The more time you give an officer to anticipate and react, the safer that officer would be.”

## FULFILLING OTHER NEEDS

After Roanoke Rapids Officer John Taylor was shot in November while stopping a car on Interstate 95, investigators learned the suspects had stolen the car and were fugitives from Pennsylvania. Although this new database does not extend to offenders from other states and wouldn’t have shown the offenders’ criminal history, Meyer said it will.

“We are a state with multiple borders and criminals do not just stay in one state,” she said. “Officers need to have the ability to look at warrants and stolen vehicles and stolen weapons and missing person cases from others states. That is the very next thing we are working on by adding the FBI hot files.”

Currently, these federal files are stored in the Division of Criminal Information system along with restricted federal files meaning users need a very high level of certification to access any of the information — a status that many local law enforcement officers do not have.

“We need the more public information in the hot files,” Meyer said. “If we have that, it would really give the officer the vast majority of information they need when they pull someone over on the side of the road.”

Another feature planned in the near future is the addition of Fishing and Wildlife files, which would have hunting and fishing licenses.

“An offender may give an officer false information when he tries to arrest him, but offenders are different when they are applying for a fishing license,” Meyer said. “They want to get that license, so they’ll put the right address on the permit.”

Once these files are added to the database, other law enforcement officers could use the address listed on a fishing license to attempt to serve outstanding warrants or a probation officer could use the address to find an fugitive.

Meyer said developers also have plans to add a facial recognition ability, so an officer could take a picture of an offender during an arrest and then run the photograph through the search and find out if the offender is giving the right name. Another feature on the way is the ability to run partial license plate numbers — a search only currently available by filing a request to the Department of Motor Vehicles that takes several days to get results.

“We are getting ready to do an interim release with advanced capabilities that would allow an officer to search for, let’s say, a white male, between 20 and 30 years old with blonde hair within a five-mile radius of a given Zip Code,” Meyer said. “We want to allow officers to do more investigative searching in the future.”

The ability to search the database for suspects who match witness’ descriptions will be invaluable to investigators, Seighman said.

“CJLEADS is currently offender-based with information linking to an offenders’ known history,” Meyer said. “When we expand it to cover incident-based information, CJLEADS is going to be that much more powerful for investigating officers.”

Seighman said he is impressed with the current capabilities of the database and excited for any improvements developers make.

“I’m just looking forward to having access to the system. Every advancement after that is icing on the cake,” he said. “The fact that they engineered it so they can continue to evolve it is what excites me.”

Local authorities said it is unclear how long it will take to fully implement the system within their respective agencies.

“This system will absolutely save officers’ lives in the future and the informed decisions they make because of CJLEADS will make our communities safer,” McCoy said. “It has been a real honor to be associated with helping the fine men and women who work so hard to make sure we are safe.”